

Acts

Acts 18:18 to 19:8 - The full gospel, not just half of it

By Acts 18:18 Paul had been travelling for up to three years already, including one and a half years in Corinth (verse 11) with Aquila and Priscilla, working in their tent-making business to help pay for his board and lodging with them (verse 3).

What had made his trip memorable so far was the gospel going into Europe for the first time, and Gallio, the Roman governor of the Greek region of Achaia (Ack-eye-ah), getting the bully Jews off Paul's back, which allowed Paul free access to spread and explain the gospel to Jews and Greeks alike throughout that region for maybe several years more. Having done that, Paul wanted to set sail back east "for Syria" from the port city of Cenchrea (Sen-kree-ay), or Kechries (Kek-crease) as it is today, 15 kms south east from Corinth.

It isn't surprising, then, that with all this success under his belt, and surviving several bouts of scary and violent opposition from his fellow countryfolk, Paul wanted to offer his joyful appreciation to God being faithful to his promise to him (in verses 9 and 10), in the traditional way of his people. So in Kechries (verse 18) Paul vowed for the next thirty days he would not cut his hair, and then have his head shaven. It would also show his fellow Jews that he wasn't trying to get them "worshipping God in ways contrary to their law" (verse 13): "To the Jews he was being a Jew" (1 Corinthians 9:20).

500 plus kms of sailing later, Paul arrives in Ephesus (on the west coast of Turkey) along with Aquila and Priscilla, and as usual he heads for the synagogue to prove to the Jews that Jesus was the Christ (or Messiah) in their scriptures. With a promise to the Ephesians he'd be back to see them again, he leaves Aquila and Priscilla in Ephesus and he heads off alone on another long sailing trip across the eastern Mediterranean to Caesarea (in Judea, north of Jerusalem) for a quick visit with the church there, followed by a two week trip north from Caesarea to Antioch (Acts 18:19-22).

But instead of treading new ground this time, Paul travels "from place to place throughout the region of Galatia and Phrygia **strengthening all the disciples,**" **verse 23**. These were places Paul had already set up churches in, but note how important it was to Paul to **mature** those attending these churches by getting their noses into Scripture for a fuller understanding of it.

The importance of a **fuller understanding of Scripture** had also become clear back in Ephesus, because while Paul was touring the churches at his end, a highly educated Jew, Apollos, had arrived in Ephesus from Alexandria, that great Greek centre of learning with its 400,000 book library on the northern shore of Egypt. Apollos, not surprisingly in such a city of learning, had “a thorough knowledge of the scriptures” and “he spoke with great fervour and taught about Jesus accurately,” **verses 24-25**. And he too had headed for the local synagogue in Ephesus where he “began to speak boldly,” **verse 26**.

Which all sounds grand, but he had a problem; “he knew only the baptism of John,” **verse 25**. He only had **half the story**.

Apollos could easily prove from Scripture that Jesus was the Messiah, but not what Jesus had come for. That part he was lacking. Fortunately for him, Aquila and Priscilla were also in Ephesus at the time, and on listening to Apollos in the synagogue they realized his understanding was lacking. By now they knew the full gospel message about Jesus from Paul, so they could sense, or pick up on, Apollos only knowing half of it. So they took him under their wing “and explained to him the way of God more adequately,” **verse 26**.

You can see the Holy Spirit at work here, and why, because while Paul was tied up in the east there was trouble brewing in the west, back in Corinth, being stirred by Jews all over that region of Achaia, who still hadn’t come to terms with Jesus being the Messiah. But Apollos, under the careful tutelage of Aquila and Priscilla, had become an even more powerful communicator, to the point now he could “vigorously refute” these Jews “in public debate,” **verse 28**. Apollos, therefore, was filling in beautifully for Paul. But what was so important to the Holy Spirit here was having **the full gospel message understood and taught, not just half of it**.

And the Spirit made this very clear again when Paul arrived back in Ephesus in **Acts 19:1** (as promised), to find a dozen or so disciples in **verse 7** who, just like Apollos, sounded authentic, but Paul could also sense something was missing in them too. He had an idea what it was, though, because he “asked them” in **verse 2**, “Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you believed?”

For some odd reason they said they’d never “heard that there is a Holy Spirit,” **verse 2**, which Paul also thought was odd, because in his experience anyone who believed the gospel had received the Holy Spirit (Acts 10:44, 11:15-17, and 15:8). So, obviously, **they couldn’t have heard the full gospel message yet**, which prompted Paul to ask what baptism they’d received since it **hadn’t** included the giving of the Spirit (verse 3).

It was “John’s baptism” they’d received, **verse 3**. And there was nothing wrong with that, but as Paul explained in **verse 4**, “John’s baptism was a baptism of repentance.” The main focus of John’s baptism wasn’t the Holy Spirit, it was a **repentant heart**, because those who had a repentant heart would have their sins forgiven and officially “buried” in a symbolic baptism in water. Forgiveness and cleansing were the two things people received in John’s baptism so they could put their past behind them and start afresh.

But that was only **part** of what God had in mind. John’s baptism was meant only as preparation for the next step, because as Paul points out in **verse 4**, John himself had “told the people to **believe in the one coming after him, that is, in Jesus.**” So even John understood that his baptism of repentance wasn’t the full story. There was more to come that only Jesus could fulfill. And that’s what Paul explained to these disciples in Ephesus, that a new life would open up to them by Jesus’ death and resurrection, and the gift of the Holy Spirit **making this new life real in their own daily experience.** So they “were baptized into the name of the Lord Jesus,” **verse 5**, as proof they understood and believed it.

And this time they did receive the Holy Spirit, **verse 6**, because they’d heard and believed **the full gospel** taught by Paul.

But how did they know they’d received the Holy Spirit, or recognize that a new and different life was opening up to them, that they could literally experience and know was happening? Well, “When Paul placed his hands on them,” **verse 6**, and “the Holy Spirit came on them, they spoke in tongues and prophesied.”

It was remarkable and instant proof that life was going to be different all right. But why speaking in tongues, and is this something we should expect to happen after we’re baptized in the name of Jesus too? Or is something **still missing** if we don’t speak in tongues and prophesy?

But both of these gifts from the Holy Spirit were so appropriate for this occasion, and for these disciples in particular. Their knowledge of the gospel had been lacking, yet here they were “prophesying,” displaying **an amazing understanding of the gospel** they’d missed or never known. But they too needed proof that what they were learning was accurate and true, and what better proof than speaking it out loud in languages they’d never learnt before? Clearly something vastly different was happening that assured them Paul was right, that there really was a new and much fuller life being opened up to them by Jesus’ “baptism with the Spirit” (Matthew 3:11).

Well, since the Holy Spirit did this in Acts, why not today as well, when these two gifts would be jolly useful for those who, just like the disciples in Acts 19, think a water baptism offering forgiveness and cleansing of past sins based on Christ's death are all that we need to be classed as "Christians"? Or that our journey to 'everlasting bliss in heaven' is based on how we behave in this life, repenting when we jump the tracks, and resolving to do better in the New Year (just like John's baptism of repentance)?

But what clues do we look for that show the Holy Spirit is giving US a fuller understanding of the gospel too? Could there be a clue in what Paul did next? Because when "Paul entered the synagogue" in Ephesus this time, in **Acts 19:8**, he began a three month course "arguing persuasively about **the kingdom of God.**" This wasn't the focus of John's baptism, and it hadn't been Paul's either, but in the last verse in Acts he was still "boldly preaching the kingdom of God."

So is our clue that we've received the Holy Spirit **a fuller understanding of the kingdom of God**? But why did it need "bold preaching" and "persuasive argument"? Because the Jews were having great trouble accepting Jesus as the Messiah. Which was such a pity because as Messiah, and now the resurrected Messiah as well, the prophecies in the Old Testament that the Messiah would fulfill were coming to pass - and in their lifetime. The kingdom of God would still come in full power in the future, yes, but because Jesus had already been resurrected as king of the kingdom it had already begun, and in power. Not in power over the world so much yet, but **as power in the lives of Christians.**

What our baptism with the Spirit does is make that power of the kingdom of God real in our lives now, because that is the Spirit's job now. But it was proving difficult to convince the church of that back then, because if the only baptism they'd received was John's, then it's not surprising it would take a while in Scripture to show what Jesus' baptism with the Holy Spirit and fire was for. The "fire," for instance, was meant to burn off all the accumulated junk ideas they'd picked up from the world, so their minds could be filled instead with "the divine nature" of Jesus and all its "qualities in increasing (or **fuller**) measure," **2 Peter 1:4-8.**

So this was Paul's goal in the church, to teach that this is what the Spirit was now doing and they could experience it in exciting and ever fuller reality in their own lives. So that, as the days and weeks pass, we "become mature, attaining to the whole measure of **the fullness of Christ,**" **Ephesians 4:13**, "For in Christ all the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form, and **you have been given fullness in Christ,**" **Colossians 2:9-10.** This was the FULL gospel of the kingdom of God, that John's baptism prepared people for, but on its own was only half the story. And all this comes out in Acts 18 and 19.